

DCH Retreat on Mary MacKillop, 2nd October 2010 - 10 am to 5 pm.

Who was Mary MacKillop? Much has been written about her. There are testimonies of her by the Sisters of the Congregation of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart which she co-founded with Fr. Woods in 1866, and there is her extensive correspondence some of which, in the forms of three books, you may wish to have a look at in the breaks on the table in the other room. In plunging into her writing, I felt excited and overwhelmed with the many possibilities there are for our age to find inspiration in her wise words.

Mary MacKillop, with other holy men and women in the past who were later canonised for their sanctity, is known as having been excommunicated, wrongly, by the local bishop and who disagreed with Church authorities when she felt to not do so would put her into conflict with the vows she had made before God. These aspects of her life are true, but she is also the woman who kept lollies in her pockets for children, who loved animals, always allowed creation to speak to her of God, always sensitive to the least fortunate. She was someone amazingly free from the illusion of self-importance who readily forgave others and always spoke kindly of others, even those who had hurt her deeply.

This humility brought her a freedom, a freedom to love and to serve. She was a practical mystic whose concerns led her naturally to meet the needs around her, especially in education and in service of the poor.

In our ambiguous times, we need more than ever to place ourselves into the hands of a “Good God”. Mary offers us a way to live the Christian paradox - that of life coming through death. (grain of wheat that has to die...). She lived this Eucharistic memorial, constantly dying and rising with Christ, as she united her will with that of her “Good God”.

Mary’s trust that God would take care of all allowed her to transcend the many hardships and uncertainties of her life. I will not go now into greater detail of her life, as some of these will be evident as we proceed. After lunch, there will also be a DVD which will give highlights of her life. We will look at the short version lasting about half an hour. However I have scanned some portraits of her as well as a few photos, so let's look at them now.

2. Family Tragedies: Faith in God's Providence

Mary was the eldest of 8 children. When she was 5, her baby sister, the fourth child, died at 1 year of age. Infant mortality in those days of course was very common. The family had no permanent home of their own, as her father's attempts at business had failed and he became bankrupt. Due to an impulsively idealistic nature, and yet a quite tactless personality, he could find no way to provide for the family, Mary became a clerk at 16 and later governess to her uncle's children in Penola. It is there she met in 1861 Fr. Tennyson Woods, a young priest with a vision that God was to be found in all and everywhere. She had always dreamed of a life as a religious but felt until she had paid the family debts this was not a possibility for her and to that end worked as a teacher from 1863-65 in Portland SA in a Denominational School. In 1866 she responded to Fr Wood's invitation that she and her two sisters Annie, No. 5 and Lexie, No. 6 who later became a Good Shepherd Sister, would found a school there and teach disadvantaged children. At that time, Mary had started to wear a plain black dress as a sign of religious dedication and is addressed as Sister Mary by Bishop Sheil. She had communicated her wish to enter religious life to her mother at that time and Flora seemed to be greatly pained by this. This school was a tiny stable that her brother John, (No.3) had converted into a schoolroom. John then left for NZ from where he tried to support his mother and the other siblings. Only 1 year later, in January 1868, whilst out riding he fell off the horse and died. He was 22 years old.

(letter of MMK to Flora McK 7/1/1868) This letter came from Adelaide where Mary had followed Fr. Woods' call who had been appointed as Director of Catholic Education in Adelaide and he wanted to have Mary start a school there. She had made her first vows in August 1867, 4 months before this letter was written.

One and a half year later, her father who had separated from her mother in 1859 by mutual agreement and had lived with relatives, died. Mary could not be at his bedside, and so found consolation in the fact that her mother had been with him when he died. **(Letter of MMK to FMK)** Schools continued to be opened and many postulants joined the order. Her own sister Maggie, who had suffered from rheumatic fever as a child and had never been in good health since, died in December 1872 at the age of 29 years. In between her father's death and Maggie's, Mary had been through her excommunication from Sep 1871 to Feb 22 1872 when the excommunication had been lifted. We will look at her reactions to this in a later segment.

(Letter MMK to FMK 17 December 1872). Six years after Maggie's death, her youngest sibling Peter died at the age of 20 years, when Mary was 36 years. No correspondence exists regarding

Mary's reactions to this, nor to her losing Lexie at the age of 32 years who had in their younger days taught with her at Penola, and who had later become a Good Shepherd Sister. Mary was 40 years at that time. Now, of the original eight children, only three remained: Mary, Donald who had become a Jesuit, and Annie, who lived to the ripe old age of 81 years and died in 1929. Then came what could be described as the bitterest blow of all. In May 1886, when Mary was 44 years, 70-year old Flora MacKillop drowned in a shipwreck near Eden. Mary had invited her mother to Sydney to help with a fund raising bazaar she had organised there. She and her Sisters were eagerly awaiting her arrival when, instead, they received news of her death. Mary's grief and anguish were compounded by the knowledge that she had put some pressure on her mother to make the trip to Sydney. She wrote to her sister Annie and her brother Donald as follows: **Letters MMK to Annie MK 1st June 1886 and 17th June 1886**)

**Scripture “whoever does not take up the Cross and follow me is not worthy of me.
Matt 10:37.**

REFLECTION:

Let us now take 20 minutes to reflect on what we heard, and think about our own lives at this moment. Are there old hurts, slights, or losses I have been hanging on to that I may wish to place in the Heart of God that is Love, asking Mary MacKillop to help me see that I too can claim God's gifts of patience and courage in my sufferings, and through them come to acceptance, and so to peace and so to joy. (Free to move to wherever we feel drawn). (20”)

3 Being peaceful in the face of Persecution

A home life marked by hardship, poverty and even want, and the loss of many family members, some in tragic circumstances, were not the only sufferings endured by Mary. In order to follow her call to be a Josephite, Mary, like Abraham, left all that she knew and loved and moved to a place that God showed her.

Her first major move was from Portland, where members of her family were, to Penola, S.A. to take charge of the catholic school there and to become the first Sister of St Joseph. This was a big change, yet she became quickly at home there. She had worked there for two years as a governess; her sisters Annie and Lexie were her assistants at the school. Father Woods was her director, as he had been for several years, and she knew the families of many of the students. The

situation did not last however. The bishop was so pleased with the school in Penola that he appointed Fr Woods Director of Catholic Education in the diocese of Adelaide. Mary stayed behind until Woods realised that he needed Mary's help in setting up his and the bishop's new education system. Hence he invited her and some of her assistants to leave and come to his aid.

This was quite radical. She had never been to Adelaide, knew no one there and didn't know whether the Sisters of St Joseph would find acceptance there. However when the call from Fr Woods came in June 1867 she left everything and went willingly. She quickly became involved in the schools and charitable works that Fr Woods and his fellow priests asked her and the new sisters to undertake. Initially, everyone treated the sisters kindly and they received many applications from postulants. This quick expansion of the institute brought with it its own difficulties. Mary was a good teacher and all her life loved being with children, to talk to them and bring them little gifts. She had been in Adelaide for less than a year when she had to give up teaching and instead take on the training of the young sisters. From then she was always on the road, visiting, encouraging, supporting the sisters that lived in quite isolated situations in small communities of just 2 or 3. She wrote countless letters to them, and never again did she have a class or a school she could call her own.

In September 1871 Bishop Sheil made it known he intended to change the Josephite Constitution which he had approved less than 3 years earlier. Mary had committed herself to God under that Rule. Hence she believed she would have to leave the Institute she had co-founded until she found God's will for her. However, before she could do anything out of her own free will, something happened which was different to anything she could have imagined. Instead of going of her own free will, Bishop Sheil excommunicated her, banished her from the Josephite community and threatened to excommunicate all others who might help her. When she walked out of the Franklin Street Convent Chapel that Friday morning, she had nothing with her beyond the clothes she was wearing. Like Jesus, she had nowhere to lay her head. One brave woman, Geraldine Woods, wife of Fr. Woods' brother, gave her shelter for a few days. When that became too dangerous, she was offered shelter by a Protestant lady and then a Jewish person.

MMK to FMcK 10 October 1871/ 22 November; 19 December, 15 February 1872 and 26 February 1872

Mary's excommunication experience was a test, in the way of a prophetic trial. She came through it not only exonerated but re-shaped, enhanced in charity and fortitude, more certain of

her destiny and what had to be done than ever before. The mission was all about education, especially of those who were otherwise deprived of it, and of other forms of social welfare unavailable in any other way. There was a special mission to the poor and to the Aboriginal population, and while principally there for the Catholic population, no-one was ever to be turned away. Mary was hugely conscious that her essential mission could be disrupted by other agendas in the church if its control was to pass to the hands of church authorities. She therefore fought especially hard to maintain the form of control, allowed as an exemption by the Church, that saw many religious orders owning their own government.

While quite common among the older male orders in Europe, it was relatively uncommon among the female orders, and especially the newer orders in the far-flung colonial world. Mary sought papal protection for the Institute and travelled to Rome and other destinations in Europe from March 1873 to January 1875. The Roman authorities changed the rule regarding poverty in the light of the Adelaide experience. Mary accepted this change in the spirit of obedience, but it caused a rift between her and Fr. Woods, who had drawn up the original Rules, and though Mary tried often to be reconciled with him, her long time friend and mentor, he would not accept her.

There were times when Mary had to let go of her good name, such as when Bishop Quinn of Brisbane, blamed her for ignoring the needs of the poor in his diocese, when she had to withdraw her Sisters from places where the clergy were not providing the Sisters with even the most basic necessities of life.

She had been a healthy young woman but over the years she endured many bouts of ill health. She was often forced to take to her bed with severe headaches and period pain. Some sisters claimed that she needed so much bed rest because she was a drunkard and often had a hangover. At the time the community was in debt. They only had a very limited income, the cost of living was high, and she had had to travel often to new foundations in Queensland, Armidale and Sydney. As this debt increased, some sisters accused her of using convent money to finance her habit. They reported her to the bishop who decided that she was unfit to govern the Institute and ordered her to leave Adelaide permanently. This was in November 1883, when she was 41 years old when she was unfairly accused of drunkenness. In April 1884, the Bishop tried to coerce the Sisters to become a diocesan group under his control. Until the end of her life, she had to live with the repercussions of that accusation. These included losing her position of Superior General,

seeing the Congregation in the hands of an incapable leader, and being unable to do anything about it.

MMK to Sisters in Adelaide 15/11/1883. MMK to Bishop Reynolds 16/11/1883, and MMK to Dr. Campbell in Rome who had helped her previously when she had gone to Rome to have the Rules for her Congregation approved by the Vatican. 17/11/1883

Mary wrote, “God will carry you safely through every struggle.” Hold in your heart before God someone whom you need to forgive. Allow God to speak to your hurt. (5”)

5. HUMILITY: TO GIVE ALL WE HAVE IN USING OUR GIFTS AND TALENTS

It would generally be known that Mary MacKillop frequently wrote about the will of God, but not so well known that over the years, she devoted a considerable amount of attention to the virtue of humility. If people today were asked what they thought the most important virtue was, they would probably select love, or patience or courage. Humility would not rate highly in our present age of competitiveness with its mindset of individualism, focusing on our rights and entitlements. If humility does not enjoy a good press nowadays, it is also because it is often totally misunderstood and misrepresented. To many it might conjure up having a poor opinion of oneself or low self-esteem. If that were its true meaning it would hardly be worth revisiting. For Mary, humility was not connected to self-abasement, but to freedom. She distinguished between false and true humility. We have probably all come across people who tiresomely seem to enjoy belittling their achievements, in the name of humility. What they are actually doing is drawing attention to themselves. Sometimes a person may receive an unjust slur from another without making an attempt to correct the false impression believing it would keep her humble. In Mary’s terms, this kind of humility is “selfish....cold....studied”, because it is concerned with personal ambitions of reaching unrealistic pinnacles of virtue. It is in fact inverted pride and gets in the way to being natural. For Mary, true humility is inspired by kindness and thoughtfulness of others. For her, humility brought freedom of mind, for it is the ability to see things as they really are. This is echoed in our days in the writings of Joan Chittister, for whom humility is the virtue of liberation from self that makes us available to the wisdom of others. It is in fact to have a proper sense of self, knowing and accepting my limitations and not denying them. Strangely, it is having a well-grounded (*humus = earth*) assessment of oneself in relation to others. This is how Mary MacKillop understood true humility as based on charity which diverts attention away from the self to love of others and God, as opposed to false humility which centres on self in isolation

from others with a loss of perspective regarding oneself and the world. No wonder, Mary took Joseph as inspiration for her Order. It was this humility that Mary wanted to have her sisters live, to look beyond the opinions of others just as Joseph cared for Mary and Jesus without being concerned what others thought. **Circular to the Sisters 19.3.1893** Mary in this links humility and poverty, it is of course poverty of the spirit she is talking about.

This kind of humility brings Heart-freedom and leads a person to live authentically. It is radical forgetfulness of self beyond being unselfish or considering others. It is the wellspring of the heart that creatively embraces the will of God as one's destiny - and this is as vital today as it was in Mary's time. For our final words from her, let us look at the **Circular to her Sisters, written on 4 September 1906, 2 years before her death.** Of course, Mary here is not saying one should have no opinions. Not at all, but rather to not be opinionated, to be capable of listening to the other.

For our final reflection today, ask yourself

Where is God in my life as I strive to be true to myself, and to give all I have in using my gifts and talent? (10")

